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HIS TALK WITH LINCOLN

✓
BEING A LETTER WRITTEN BY
JAMES M. STRADLING

78

WITH A PREFACE BY
LORD CHARNWOOD
AND AN INTRODUCTION BY
LEIGH MITCHELL HODGES ✓



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PREFACE

BY LORD CHARNWOOD

I HAVE been asked to write a preface to a letter here published for the first time, written with no suspicion that it would become literature, by a man belonging to Lincoln's "plain people," and describing with keen intelligence and sympathy an ordinary and characteristic incident of the darkest days of Lincoln's life.

When I have come across any similar publication, of something which an unknown man has written very well, I have generally felt that the more pretentious preface,

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attached to it by the hand of a less unknown writer, is rather a tiresome thing. Yet I venture on such a preface: first, for the sake of the friend who asks me to do so; secondly, because I suppose I may induce a few more people to read the letter that follows, which I think they should do; thirdly, because Englishmen enjoy doing anything to honour the great American to whom, in spite of his most rare genius, in spite, too, of some real differences between his own people and them, they feel themselves intimately akin.

They were very dark days when this letter was written — the days

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between Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. Lincoln's often startling and nearly perpetual flow of humour can be so described, by far less humorous admirers, as to seem an almost inhuman thing, an "industrious jocularity" (to use the phrase of a solemn old gentleman whom I knew), which grows tedious to ordinary mortals. It was, of course, nothing of the kind; and I do not want to dwell ponderously upon any of the touches in this letter; but it does make Lincoln more real, and not a shade less humorous to me, to see him vividly portrayed upon an occasion when there really were things that he could have joked

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about, but, while others smiled, his awful sadness never relaxed.

Hosts of people, who did not think Lincoln a great man, soon found out that he was a good man, and reflected later that this is sometimes a more useful thing to be. The period of this letter was just the period, in looking back on which men have said: that Lincoln saved the Union; that it was a tremendously difficult feat; and that it is impossible to tell how he did it except by being so very honest. This is so nearly true that one would only get into a mist of words if one criticized it. But there is one thing to be remembered alongside of it. Lincoln

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triumphed — or, rather, his cause triumphed, if he did not — because his heart was right. Let us add that his heart was so right that he did his job supremely well.

I am tempted here to dwell on one of the ways in which he did his job better than anybody looking on could imagine at the time. The letter itself suggests one of those ways, his management of the cause of emancipation. I wish to indicate another, his military administration.

The post of a civil administrator, who, when a free people is at war, must always control its armed forces, is always one of appalling difficulty. If a reader of history has

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the imagination and the elementary knowledge of affairs to spot what some of the difficulties are, he can discover that Lincoln met them as well as any man has ever done. But there is more to be said.

When Lincoln interfered, as he sometimes reluctantly did, with the plans of the military commanders under him, he showed in the essential points far sounder military judgment than they did. It seems impudent to say this when military historians, who start very properly with the presumption that the military man will be right and the interfering civilian wrong, have said the contrary. But certain crucial

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instances happened shortly before and shortly after the time of this letter, in which, when the point is once clearly seen, it is manifest that the military critics have been quite wrong about Lincoln.

Not long before this, Lincoln had hampered McClellan in the Peninsula by withholding from him forces that McClellan thought necessary for taking Richmond, which he thought he could do. Why? Because Lincoln realized, and McClellan did not, that even a certainty of taking Richmond would not have been worth any appreciable risk of losing Washington, for Richmond was in no way vital to

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the South, and Washington — if for no other reason, yet because of the effect which its fall must have had in Europe — was vital to the North.

A little later, but still before this letter, McClellan had beaten Lee at the Antietam; and again, not long after the letter, Meade beat him again at Gettysburg. On these occasions Lincoln put every possible pressure upon each of these generals in turn to do, what neither of them did, and bring about a further battle without delay. Why? Because Lincoln realized, what McClellan and Meade in turn would not grasp, that a fair chance of crushing Lee's army entirely, before it could

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escape south of the Potomac, was worth the risk of any defeat which that army could, in its condition at either of these moments, have inflicted on the North.

This is that sort of simple reckoning with obvious facts, which anybody could do, which hardly one in ten thousand of us habitually does, and which, in the superb loneliness of his melancholy thought, Lincoln almost always did. He was like that in his dealing with the larger issues of state. He was like that in those matters of ordinary duty, in a sense larger still, with which every man and woman has to deal every day. I recall here that he was like this in

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military matters because it may help to set the pages which follow in their true light if the reader will remember that the kind, simple, and sore troubled being who stands out in them was a terribly efficacious Commander-in-Chief of the forces of the United States.

These, too, are very dark days for many of the nations of the world; when rumours of wars and the bitterness of recent war abound; and, instead of enjoying, as many had been tempted to expect, a sudden and conclusive victory of down-trodden justice, we have to realize that “the end is not yet.” It is good at this time to be reminded, as what

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follows may remind us, of one of those whom the Great Master foreshadowed in the words

“*He that endureth to the end.*”

CHARNWOOD

LONDON, *July*, 1922

INTRODUCTION

FOR many decades Holicong — once Greenville — Pennsylvania, has kept its quiet pace as a typical Bucks County cross-roads settlement. There, about the middle of the last century, dwelt John W. Gilbert, justice of the peace, tanner, and variously important citizen. And there, in the late fifties, came from the near-by village of Mechanicsville “Jim” Stradling, writer of the long-hid letter herewith first published.

Young Stradling lived with the Gilbert family while serving a sort of apprenticeship in the tannery. Then came the war, and at nine-

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teen he enlisted in a New Jersey cavalry regiment recruited around Lambertville, just across the Delaware from the rich-grown slopes of Bucks.

Of his career the main facts were his marriage with a volunteer army nurse, teaching in a Southern school, long residence in Philadelphia, where he was connected with a publishing house, and subsequent removal to Beverley, New Jersey, where he died some six years ago.

Meantime this letter which pleased its recipients was pushed into a pigeonhole to yellow with the years, but happily to escape

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the fate of much similar testimony concerning other momentous men and times.

As a historical portrait it speaks for itself, marking its author for one day, at least, a great reporter. If anything could deepen its impression, it would be remembrance that the winter of 1863 shadowed the forces and friends of the Union with a weight of gloom which only a Gettysburg could dispel.

LEIGH MITCHELL HODGES

HIS TALK WITH LINCOLN

HIS TALK WITH LINCOLN

CAMP BAYARD, VIRGINIA

March 6, 1863

MR. JOHN W. GILBERT,
GREENVILLE, PA.

MY DEAR FRIEND JOHN :

I arrived safely in camp yesterday afternoon and found Captain Boyd and the boys all well. The captain was so glad to see me that he sent me in charge of a squad of men out on picket that night on the Rappahannock River. On returning from my furlough I had a number of quite exciting experiences, which I will relate as best I can.

On leaving thy beautiful home,

Lincoln

which had been an exceedingly happy one to me for nearly three years, I took the stage for Lambertville, New Jersey, where I soon boarded a train for Trenton, and another one at Philadelphia for Washington. At Baltimore we had quite a time getting through the city, for we were pulled through it by a team of mules, and it was quite slow work. The driver of the mules used some queer language which I suppose the mules understood, for whenever he used that language and cracked his long whip the mules just did their best towards pulling. It was slow work, but we landed in due time on the other side of Baltimore.

Lincoln

I arrived in Washington about nine-thirty the next morning, and at once hunted up a restaurant, for I felt quite empty. There is one thing, John, that thee may be sure was left out of that meal, and that was “hardtack”! For one meal they were left off the bill of fare. After finishing my breakfast, I walked down to the river, where I found a river steamer which was being loaded and which was going to the front that night. I presented my furlough to the captain and told him I should be pleased to go with him to Acquia Creek that night. To my great astonishment he refused to take me on board. I said to him that my fur-

Lincoln

lough expired the next day and I was anxious to get to the front.

I told him that if I remained over the Provost Guard might pick me up and hustle me off with a lot of real deserters to the front, but I did not want to go that way. My pleading with him, however, had no effect, so I walked up to the Capitol, and walked through it and came out and walked down Pennsylvania Avenue, towards the "White House." I was thinking hard all the time and wondering what I was going to do.

While trudging down the Avenue a sudden thought — why not see the President — flashed into my

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mind, and I started for the “White House.” I supposed that all I would have to do would be to go down to the “White House,” knock on the front door, and if the President was not in, Mrs. Lincoln could tell me where he was and probably invite me in to wait until he returned. (I know, John, that thee and Letitia, and the girls will laugh your heads off when you read this, and then you will exclaim—we did not think Jim was that green.)

When I reached the front door of the “White House” I found two or three policemen on guard, who said to me, “Well, Country, what do you want?” I told them I wanted

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to see the President, when they showed me into a very large room which was full of people. Of course I was very much bewildered and did not know which way to turn.

I finally picked up courage to ask a gentleman near to me if these people had assembled to hear the President make a speech. He replied with a twinkle in his eye, after he had sized me up, that "the people were assembled to see the President, but that he was not going to make a speech, but that every one would have to wait their turn to be called into his room for a personal interview." After thanking him, I looked around the large room to see

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if I could see any one I knew. Presently I saw General Hooker, standing over on one side of the room, near a side door. At that moment a guard opened the door and General Hooker passed in. I asked one of the guards where people landed when they passed through that side door. His reply was, “Why, greeny, that goes to the President’s room.”

As soon as I could I edged my way around to that door and told the guard that I was a soldier in distress, and asked him if he could help me. I told him I had been home on a furlough and — “You want to get it extended I suppose. I do not believe the President will do that.”

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“I want to get to the front to-night.” I told him there was a steamer going down to-night, but the captain of the steamer had refused me passage. “Oh,” he said, “that is an Indian of another skin.” I asked him what he meant by that, when he said, “It is a horse of another color.” He looked at me and said, “You are very green, aren’t you?” I acknowledged that I was just slightly like a green apple, but I told him I could learn, and in fact I had learned a whole lot since ten o’clock this morning. I said to him that if I could get a chance to put my case before the President, and get him to thoroughly understand

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that I was endeavoring to get to and not from the front, that he would assist me. When he had heard me through he said “D——n all steamboat captains.” Probably he had run up against a steamboat captain some time in his career, too.

He took my furlough and, calling another guard to watch the door, disappeared. He was gone for a long, long time. While I was waiting a very nicely dressed gentleman came to the guard, and showing him his card, he was passed in. I asked the guard who that was that could go in by simply showing his card. He replied, “That was United States Senator Ben Wade of Ohio.”

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While still waiting, another fine-looking old gentleman and a lady came up and handed the guard a letter, which he at once sent in to the President. The lady's eyes were very red, and soon she commenced to weep again, and I heard her remark to her escort, "I must see the President to-day, or my son will be shot to-morrow."

Of course I was very anxious to learn who they were and what was the trouble with her son, and was about to ask the guard when the other guard, the one who had my papers, appeared and said, "Follow me." I followed him into a small room where there was a gentleman

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sitting, and my guard addressed him as Mr. Hay. He said, "Please be seated, the President will see you very soon."

While waiting there, Mr. Hay was passing in and out all the time, but he found time to tell me that he had given my furlough to the President, with the statement that I was endeavoring to get to the front, while most of them were trying their best to get away from the front. I told Mr. Hay that the fact that the President was warmly inclined towards those soldiers who remained in the army and at the front had trickled down through the army. For that reason I had no

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fear about making an effort to see him. While sitting there waiting I began to realize where I was and what I would have to go through, and what I would have to say to the President. I became, as thee used to say, John, weak in the knees and warm under the collar.

I did not have long to wait, however, for in a few minutes Mr. Hay came in and said, "The President will see you." I followed him into the President's room, when he announced, "Sergeant Stradling," and passed out. As I came abreast of the people in the room, there sat Ben Wade and two other gentlemen I did not recognize, and Gen-

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eral Hooker was standing up and saying good-by to the President.

As I approached, the President hesitated a moment and asked me to take a seat, when he went on and said good-by to General Hooker, and said, “General, we shall expect to have some good news from you very soon.” I saluted the general, which he returned and then passed out.

In my efforts to acknowledge the President’s invitation to take a seat I had finally blurted out that I would rather stand. The President then arose, and I did not think he would ever stop going up. He was the tallest man, John, I think I ever

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saw. He then turned around to me and extended a hand which was fully three times as large as mine, and said, "What can I do for you, my young friend?"

He had a grip on him like a vise, and I felt that my whole hand would be crushed. I had a small fit of coughing, during which time I regained my composure. Then I told him my case briefly as I could. He then signed my furlough, on which Mr. Hay had written across the face of it: "To any steamboat captain going to the front, please give bearer transportation," and handed it to me and said, "If I have any influence with the steamboat captains,

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I think that will take you to the front.”

I thanked him and was taking my leave, when he said to Senator Wade, “Senator, we have had the head of the Army here a few minutes ago, and learned from him all he cared to tell. Now we have here the tail of the Army, so let us get from him how the rank and file feel about matters. I mean no reflection on you, Sergeant, when I say the tail of the Army.”

I said I understood him and knew what he was driving at. He said a great many men had deserted in the last few months, and he was endeavoring to learn the cause. He

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said there must be some good reason for it. Either the Army was opposed to him, to their Generals or the Emancipation Proclamation, and he was very desirous of learning from the rank and file about the conditions in the Army. “None of the Generals desert or resign, and we could spare a number of them better than we can spare so many privates.”

Turning around to me, he asked if I could enlighten him on any of these points. In the meantime I had become perfectly cool, perfectly composed. The weakness had disappeared from my knees and the heat from under my collar. I braced

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myself to tell him things which I knew would not be pleasing to him. I however determined to tell him frankly and truthfully all I knew about the feeling in the Army, as far as I knew it.

First I said, “Mr. President, so far as I know, the Army has the utmost confidence in your honesty and ability to manage this war. So far as I can learn, the army had no faith in the ability of General Burnside. In fact it had but very little faith in him, and no respect for his ability. He appeared to us as a general who had no military genius whatever, and fought his battles like some people play the

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fiddle, by main strength and awkwardness. Not the most approved way of fighting a battle, surely.”

The President asked me if I was in the battle of Fredericksburg. I replied in the affirmative. “Did you see much of the battle?” I replied that when the fog lifted we could see nearly the whole line. I explained to him that the battleground consisted of a long and level plain and was what they call in Virginia “bottom land.” The rebels were entrenched on a number of low hills skirting this plain on the south while at the foot of Mary’s Heights was a sunken road. Their

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batteries and more infantry were entrenched on the heights proper, while the sunken road was full of infantry and sharpshooters. This was the position against which General Burnside launched General Hooker's corps, the flower of the army. "You know too well the result, for I can observe the great gloom which still hangs around you on account of that battle."

Senator Wade then asked me if I thought there was any excuse for such a blunder. I replied that if it was agreeable, I would give my views about the matter. The President spoke up and said, "This is

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very interesting to me, so please go ahead.”

I said the country was an open one. There were no mountains or large rivers to cross, but both flanks of the rebel army were susceptible of being turned, and Lee flanked out of his strong position. Even we privates wondered why such an attack was made. General Burnside must have known of the sunken road, for we of the cavalry had been over this road with General Bayard in 1862, and he must have informed General Burnside all about it. If General Burnside had possessed any military genius, he would have flanked Lee out of that

Lincoln

strong position, and fought him where he could have had at least an equal chance.

All of those present listened very attentively, when the President said, “What you have stated, Sergeant, seems very plausible to me. When General Hooker left us but a few minutes ago he said, ‘Mr. President, I have the finest army that was ever assembled together, and I hope to send you good news very soon.’ That is just the language General Burnside used when he left me shortly before the battle of Fredericksburg. And such a disaster that followed still makes my heart sick.” (I wonder if the Pres-

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ident has visions of future disasters to follow.)

I said, “ Mr. President, even privates when on the ground cannot help seeing and wondering why certain movements are made. I refer to the charges of General Hooker on our right. Our duty, however, is not to criticise, but to obey even if we get our heads knocked off. I have found that soldiers are willing to obey without hesitation and take the chances when they feel that their show is equal to that of the enemy.”

The President said, “ You have said nothing about how the soldiers feel towards the Emancipation Proclamation.”

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I replied, “Mr. President, I approach the Emancipation Proclamation with great reluctance, for I know how your heart was set on issuing that document. So far as I am personally concerned, I heartily approve of it. But many of my comrades said that if they had known the war would free the ‘niggers’ they would never have enlisted, so many of them deserted. Others said they would not desert, but would not fight any more, and sought positions in the wagon train; the Ambulance Corps; the Quartermaster’s Department, and other places, to get out of fighting. In fact, the ‘nigger in the woodpile’ is an

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old saying, but a very true one in this instance.

“I was born a Quaker, and was therefore an anti-slavery young man when I entered the army. When I was a boy I attended from two to three debating societies a week, and the slavery question was always under debate in one form or another. I had heard the question debated and helped debate it for two or three years before I entered the army, and was therefore a full-blooded abolitionist, and welcomed the proclamation with open arms. The issuing of the proclamation caused many to desert, no doubt, and the presence of General Burn-

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side at the head of the army caused many others to leave the army.”

I suppose the President and Senator Wade and the other two gentlemen wondered what they had before them, but, John, I had been invited to the feast and had my say.

The President sat still a moment or two, when he said, “Sergeant, I am very glad indeed to have had your views. I am glad to know how many of your comrades feel about slavery, and I am exceedingly glad you have mentioned the Emancipation Proclamation, for I shall take this opportunity to make a few remarks which I desire you to convey to your comrades.

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“The proclamation was, as you state, very near to my heart. I thought about it and studied it in all its phases long before I began to put it on paper. I expected many soldiers would desert when the proclamation was issued, and I expected many who care nothing for the colored man would seize upon the proclamation as an excuse for deserting. I did not believe the number of deserters would materially affect the army. On the other hand, the issuing of the proclamation would probably bring into the ranks many who otherwise would not volunteer.

“After I had made up my mind

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to issue it, I commenced to put my thoughts on paper, and it took me many days before I succeeded in getting it into shape so that it suited me. Please explain to your comrades that the proclamation was issued for two reasons. The first and chief reason was this, I felt a great impulse moving me to do justice to five or six millions of people. The second reason was that I believed it would be a club in our hands with which we could whack the rebels. In other words, it would shorten the war. I believed that under the Constitution I had a right to issue the proclamation as a 'Military Necessity.' I

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have faith that it will shorten the war by many months. How does the rank and file view General Hooker?"

I replied that General Hooker was a hard fighter. "The boys have great respect for him, as well as great faith in his ability."

The President then extended his hand and said, "I thank you very much, and I trust you will reach the front in the morning."

When I came out I endeavored to see Mr. Hay, but he had gone. The door guard was still on duty and I slipped up to him and said, "You need not call me 'greeny' any more, for I have learned more

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to-day than many people learn in fifty years.”

I then thanked him for his assistance, and left the White House. I started for a lunch counter, for thee may believe I was hungry. After filling up on good things, in which “hardtack” had no share, I walked rapidly to the boat. I showed the captain my furlough with the President’s name on it. He gazed at it a moment when he said, “Git aboard.”

About the time I had reached the deck General Hooker climbed aboard too. He took the captain’s cabin, while I took to a pile of bags filled with oats. I pulled the bags

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around and made quite a nice bed, where I slept all night and landed at Acquia Creek next morning and reached the regiment in the afternoon. What a lot of unexpected experience I had met with! I am no longer a “greeny” now. At least I do not believe I am.

Mr. Lincoln was a very sad, woe-begone, gloomy-looking man. He did not smile, and his face did not lighten up once while I was in his presence. John, I was awful glad to get out, and when I did get away I felt as though I had been to a funeral.

Senator Wade did smile once or twice, and so did the other two gen-

Lincoln

tlemen who were present, but Lincoln did not even show the shadow of a smile. His long, sad and gloomy face haunted me for days afterward.

I give his exact words, as near as I can remember them. To have the President of the United States talk to me, and to be allowed to talk to him, was such an event in my life that I may be pardoned, I think, if I did feel “a little set up,” as it were.

Now, John, I have written thee a long letter, much longer than I intended to write when I commenced, but there seemed to be things to say and I could not resist the temptation to say them. Please

Lincoln

thank thy wife (Letitia) for the basket of “good things” which she put up for me before I started, and also say to my dear little Sarah, that her “Dim” reached the camp in safety. With very kindest regards I remain

Sincerely Thine

J. M. STRADLING

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